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ABSTRACT

Golden West College's (GWC's) Interpersonal Communication course was designed to help students develop communication skills, understand the criteria used in selecting the most appropriate way to communicate, implement these choices effectively through verbal and nonverbal means, and evaluate the effectiveness of these choices. Students learn the conceptual basis for seven competency-based skills: initiating and managing a conversation, clarifying perceptions, using descriptive language, expressing emotions, using active listening, responding with relational feedback, and using assertive messages. They practice these skills in class, and then demonstrate their competency in these skills to a peer assessor in the Interpersonal Communication Laboratory. Peer assessors are trained through the laboratory component of a sophomore-level communications/leadership course, and "A" students may apply for a paid position as a peer assessor. The peer assessors are evaluated by their instructors on their ability to create a supportive climate, give behaviorally descriptive feedback, and assist other students in learning any skills they were unable to master. Even though the laboratory is the primary setting for individual skill assessment, skills are also practiced and assessed in the classroom by the instructor, the students' peers, and the students themselves. Since 1983-84, students have also had the opportunity to demonstrate interpersonal communication skills through a course equivalency assessment package that includes an oral examination, a 2-hour written test of textbook content, and oral demonstrations of two of the seven interpersonal communication skills. GWC's program provides a reliable, economically feasible method of assessing communication skills, applicable to English as a Second Language and remedial English courses. (VVC)

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"Strategies for Assessment of the Basic Undergraduate Interpersonal Communication Course"

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The success of postsecondary students in college and subsequently on the job is dependent on their mastery of basic skills. Oral communication has been legislated as part of the official definition of basic skills through a 1978 amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The College Board announced in it's "Project EQuality" that speaking and listening is one of the six basic academic essentials for college preparation in the 80's (*Spectra*, 1985).

As a result of these and other actions that officially recognize the importance of speaking and listening skills, the challenge to the speech communication discipline has shifted somewhat from persuading others of the importance of speaking and listening to determining feasible ways to assess these skills. An Oral Communication Assessment Conference, sponsored by the SCA Educational Policies Board and the Committee on Assessment and Testing, will be held at the University of Denver on July 13-15, 1990. One strand of that conference will focus on the assessment of interpersonal communication skills.

Interpersonal communication typically is characterized as an informal event that takes place in a nonperformance-oriented context. It is also more intricately associated with the individual personality of the communicator than are more formal communication events. Therefore establishing a framework for assessing interpersonal communication

skills seems to be a greater challenge than designing assessment programs for speaking and listening skills that occur in the more performance-oriented contexts which involve public speaking, discussion and debate, oral interpretation, or theatre, for example.

Questions such as these arise

1. What interpersonal skills should be taught and assessed?
2. How can the skills of each student be adequately assesssed?
3. How can reliability be built into the assessment process?
4. How can interpersonal skill assessment be made economically feasible?
5. How can interpersonal skill assessment facilitate cultural diversity?

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a prescriptive set of responses to these questions. Rather, this paper will outline several assessment strategies that have been used to answer these questions at Golden West College and could easily be adapted to other programs in combinations that fit the student populations and goals of those programs.

The Interpersonal Communication course (SpCom 100) at Golden West College can be selected by students to fulfill the oral communication requirement for the Associate of Arts degree. The course is also a requirement for graduates of the Nursing and Psychiatric Technician

Certificate Programs. An average of between 20 and 25 sections are offered each semester with an enrollment of 30 students per section.

The Interpersonal Communication course has been competency-based since 1980. While a variety of strategies have evolved over the years, the purpose of the course has basically remained a four-pronged approach to the achievement of interpersonal competence; namely, to assist each student in:

1. Developing a broad range of communication skill alternatives to supplement his/her habitual responses in a given situation.
2. Determining the crieria to use in selecting the most appropriate ways to communicate.
3. Implementing these communication choices effectively through verbal and nonverbal means, and
4. Evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of the ways that he/she chooses to communicate to determine what, if any, changes might be made in another similar situation. (Ratliffe and Hudson, 1988)

In step four, a distinction is made between appropriateness and effectiveness. *Effectiveness* can be attained by demonstrating proficiency in using one or more skill components in a classroom or laboratory context. However, the appropriate use of a skill does not necessarily follow from the deminstration of skill proficiency, or effectiveness. In the Golden West model, *appropriateness* involves the

successful analysis of three factors when deciding how to communicate in a specific situation: (1) the context, (2) the communicator's goal, and (3) the other person, including the nature of the relationship that exists between the communicator and the other person. Appropriateness is integral to interpersonal communication competence. (Ratliffe and Hudson, 1989b) In fact, the overriding competency that is learned in this course is the high order critical thinking skill of making communication choices that promote appropriateness in any given communication context.

Within this framework, a combination of several strategies are used to assist learners in assessing their levels of interpersonal competence. These strategies fall can described in relationship to the three contexts in which they occur. (1) the laboratory setting, (2) the classroom setting, and (3) the examination by credit option.

The Laboratory Setting

Since 1982, Golden West College has had a communication laboratory in which skills for several basic courses are assessed. (Ratliffe, 1984, 1987, Ratliffe and Hudson, 1986) A departmental agreement exists that requires all students enrolled in Interpersonal Communication to learn the conceptual basis for seven comptency-based skills and to have the opportunity to practice them in the classroom. Furthermore, they are required to demonstrate the skills with a partner outside of the classroom in the Interpersonal Communication Laboratory which is housed in the

Writing and Speech Communication Center in the library

The seven skills are developmental and must be demonstrated in the following sequence

1. Initiating and managing a conversation
2. Clarifying perceptions
3. Using descriptive language
4. Expressing emotions
5. Using active listening
6. Responding with relational feedback
7. Using assertive messages

Students are provided with skill sheets that consist of behaviorally descriptive statements of from five to nine specific skill components that must be included in a given demonstration in order to meet the mimium criteria for one of three performance levels

1. Mastery (which equates will "skill effectiveness")
2. Satisfactory (which equates with "minimum competence")
3. Needs to be Repeated (which equates with "below minimum competence")

It is a departmental requirement that a student must receive a score of at least Satisfactory, the equivalent of minimum competence, to earn a grade of "C" or better in the course To obtain a final grade of "D," a student must attempt each skill at least once Most instructors grade on a point

system and translate the three possible ratings into scores of 15, 10, and 5. Students may return to the laboratory to repeat skill demonstrations as often as they wish. The highest rating (and score) becomes the one of record.

Golden West College primarily uses this laboratory approach to assessing interpersonal competence. We have answered the four questions raised in the introduction to this paper this way.

1. <u>What should be taught and assessed</u>? While instructors are free to select their own textbooks, only four texts, in various editions, have been selected over the past nine years since a competency-based system of instruction has been implemented.

Adler, R. B., L. B. Rosenfeld, and N. Towne. *Interplay*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Adler, R. B., and N. Towne. *Looking Out/Looking In*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Ratliffe, S. A., and D. D. Hudson. *Skill-Building for Interpersonal Competence*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Verderber, K. S. and R. F. Verderber. *Inter-Act*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

These textbooks include a variety of similar theoretical topics. The department members were able to reach consensus on what core skills are essential to constitute competence. While the operationalization of

the seven essential development skills selected by the departmental faculty tends to be revised occasionally, the skills sheets have remained remarkably similar over the nine year lifetime of the laboratory approach.

2. How can each student's skills be adequately assessed?

Golden West College has chosen to staff the Interpersonal Communication Laboratory with student assessors. Training of peer assessors is made possible through a laboratory component of a sophomore level course, Communication Skills for Leadership and Supervision (SpCom 240) for which a student receives four units of credit and meets for three lecture and three laboratory hours. The three laboratory hours provide the student with a practicuum to develop leadership skills while at the same time providing a staff for the Interpersonal Communication Laboratory. Furthermore, students who complete the leadership class with a grade of "A" may apply for a paid position as peer assessor. These two options create staffing that enables the laboratory to provide adequate assessment for each student enrolled in Interpersonal Communication.

3. How is interrater reliability achieved? Four primary methods exist for achieving and monitoring interrater reliability. (1) Part of the SpCom 240 course work involves re-demonstration of the SpCom 100 skill requirements. Peer assessors may not staff the laboratory for a given skill until they have demonstrated it at a mastery level to their instructor. (2) Peers assess these re-demonstrations in SpCom 240 and

are assessed by their instructor on their ability to create a supportive climate, give behaviorally descriptive feedback, and assist other students in learning any skill components they were not able to demonstrate at a mastery level. A behaviorally descriptive criteria is used in these "assessment of the assessor" sessions. (3) All students enrolled in SpCom 240 are required to listen to an audiotaped demonstration of each skill and then tape an oral assessment and provide written feedback to the person demonstrating the skill on tape. In turn, the instructor provides an oral critique of the audiotaped assessment for each student and any discrepencies in assessment techniques or outcomes are discussed prior to the date when SpCom 100 students may come to the laboratory to be assessed on a given skill. (4) Finally, the SpCom 240 instructor listens in on actual assessments as they occur in the laboratory setting with SpCom 100 students.

4 How can assessment be made economically feasible? Since 1983, the Speech Communication Department has received an annual budget of $9,000 to hire peer assessors. While Speech Communication Center services have increased and instructor staffing has been added to serve other courses, the $9,000 budget continues to provide adequate staffing for the

Interpersonal Communication Laboratory. In fact, the peer assessors have taken on additional functions in developmental speech communication

courses for limited English speaking students with no need to request an increase in budget.

5. How can interpersonal skill assessment facilitate cultural diversity?

At Golden West College, the Speech Communication Department is in the midst of determining non-discriminatory methods introducing prerequisites on courses to assist all students in placing themselves in courses at levels at which they can succeed. A primary concern is for the approximately seventeen percent of the Golden West College student body who do not speak English as their first language. More specifically, our concern is for those students whose English is limited to the point that they need developmental instruction in speaking and listening skills in order to benefit from instruction at the transfer level.

Primarily as an outgrowth of the Golden West College competency-based approach to interpersonal communication skills, two developmental courses have been designed. Pronunciation Skills for ESL Students (SpCom 020) and Speaking and Listening Skills for ESL Students (SpCom 025). (See Ratliffe and Hudson, 1986, 1989a.) In addition, a remedial course for native speakers of English (SpCom 090) that parallels the SpCom 025 course was introduced into the curriculum last year.

While prerequisites and testing procedures that will help students accurately place themselves at the appropriate level of instruction within the Speech Communication Department is the next area for development

in our program, we do believe that the competency-based assessment of interpersonal skills has promoted cultural diversity. In the classroom, cultural differences in using skills seem to be frequent topics of discussion as each skill area is introduced. Student assessors report that the students they work with in the laboratory often discuss openly how communication skills in their countries of birth are similar to or different from the ones they are demonstrating. The seven skills areas are viewed as optimal competencies within the context of the American mainstream culture, not as prescriptive for all cultures. Frequent discussions center around the ability to function successful in more than one culture, or subculture, at a time. Finally, competence in pronunciation and grammar is not a part of the interpersonal communication assessment program.

The Classroom Setting

Even though the laboratory setting is the primary method used for individual skill assessment at Golden West College, skill practice and assessment does occur in the classroom. Over the years, several materials have been developed to facilitate classroom skill assessment. Many of these materials, including both textbooks and videotapes, are published and available for general use. [See Ratliffe and Hudson, 1988, 1989b, Ratliffe, Hudson, and Adler, 1990.] Strategies for assessing interpersonal competence occur along a range which involves direct instructor evaluation, peer feedback, and self-evaluation.

1 Instructor Evaluation The following include strategies for instructor evaluation that have been used at Golden West College

A Students practice skill demonstrations in groups of three The instructor circulates among triads. In a class of thirty students it is possible to give each triad ten minutes of assessment time every tenth class hour.

B Students have signed for 10 minute periods during instructor office hours to be assessed on a specific skill. Every student could be personally assessed on at least one skill per semester

C. Mid-semester and final examinations have been designed around small group meetings during which six to eight students must hold a twenty-minute conversation. They draw one skill that they must demonstrate during the conversation and then they are assigned a second skill that they must demonstrate at some time during the conversation. The instructor observes and assesses each student on two skills each. [This technique has also been used by dividing a class in thirds. While two-thirds practice skills, another third is being assessed by the instructor in small groups.]

D Students speak to the entire class either about how appropriately they have used a skill in a situation outside the classroom or to demonstrate a skill to the class, who is their audience While this strategy may seem to turn an interpersonal classroom into a public speaking setting, the result seems to be an increased conversational

openess among all classmates and a highly supportive climate develops.

E. Access to video or audio recorders can be provided students outside of class for the purpose of recording skill demonstrations that can be viewed by the instructor outside of class.

2. Peer Evaluation. The following strategies using peer evaluation have met with success in the classroom:

A. Students work in triads with Person A demonstrating a given skill to Person B, who listens and responds. Person C does not participate in the conversation, but provides behaviorally descriptive feedback to Person A at the conclusion of the conversation. This strategy has been systemetized through the use of a textbook and a videotape of systematic student skill demonstrations and assessments that integrates triadic skill assessment with the more traditional basic textbooks in interpersonal communication. (Ratliffe and Hudson, 1989b; Ratliffe, Hudson, and Adler, 1990.)

B. Another version of the same exercise involves assigning students to small groups of six in which one to four students may provide feedback to Person A and B following their skill demonstration.

3. Self-Evaluation. A foundation for competency-based assessment of interpersonal skills involves goal-setting by the student. Instructors

assist students in contracting for specific skill development and keeping records of progress toward those goals. Both written and audiotaped journals can be kept by individual students to record skill demonstrations, descriptions of attempts to use specific skills in everyday conversations, and evaluations of how appropriately skills were used in specific contexts. [See Ratliffe and Hudson 1989b (Viewer's Guide); Ratliffe, Hudson, and Adler 1990 (Viewer's Guide) for specific strategies.]

The strategies provided in here are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to stimulate combinations of strategies that might provide a systematic assessment procedure to operationalize the unique goals of other programs.

The Examination by Credit Option

At Golden West College, the collegewide curriculum committee stipulated in 1983 that students must be provided with a method of demonstrating course equivalency if oral communication were to be made a graduation requirement for the Associate of Arts degree and if Interpersonal Communication were to be a course that could fulfill the requirement. The curriculum committee further stipulated that the equivalency examination must provide oral methods for assessing interpersonal competence. The Speech Communication Department was given one year to develop an oral examination to assess course

equivalency. (Bryan and Ratliffe, 1984a, 1984b)

During the 1983-84 year, a course equivalency assessment package was developed that consists of three separate segments. The first segment is an oral examination that utilizes three series of unscripted, videotaped role-play situations to which students respond orally during timed 1-1/2 minute segments. The instrument includes three parts:

1. Part One consists of seven situations to which the student responds by reporting how appropriately communication skills are used by the role-players.
2. Part Two consists of five situations to which the the student responds by using specific communication skills as though he or she were a third person in the conversation.
3. Part Three consists of a request to define each of seven skill areas with each definition followed by two situations to which the student responds by reporting how appropriately each designated skill is used by the role-players.

The remaining two segments of the equivalency examination include (1) a traditional two-hour comprehensive written text over the textbooks currently in useand (2) oral demonstrations of two of the seven interpersonal communication skills that are required of all students who enroll in the Interpersonal Communication course. Demonstrations must qualify for a mastery rating.

Summary

This paper outlines the systematic competency-based assessment program in Interpersonal Communication at Golden West College and responds to four major questions that tend to arise when considering the assessment of skills involved in a basic interpersonal communication course, including (1) what skills should be taught and assessed, (2) how can the skills of each student be adequately assessed, (3) how can reliability be built into the assessment process, (4) how can interpersonal skill assessment be made economically feasible, and (5) how can interpersonal skill assessment facilitate cultural diversity?

Strategies used at Golden West College are described as they exist in three contexts the laboratory, the classroom, and the credit by examination option This paper further described published materials that have been developed to support the Golden West College program as well as competency-based programs at other institutions The strategies provided in this paper are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to describe options from which other institutions might select for actual use or for use as models to design strategies that might better support their purposes and programs

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